

BRIEFING | NOVEMBER 2024

“Creating harmony is our collective responsibility”

Tackling conflict drivers in Eastern Equatoria State

The outbreak of civil war in South Sudan in December 2013 and its second iteration in July 2016, coupled with persistent subnational communal violence and political instability, have undermined post-independence development gains across South Sudan and in Eastern Equatoria State in particular.

More than a decade after the country attained independence from Sudan, Eastern Equatoria State – like much of the country – remains entrenched in fragility, economic insecurity, instability, poverty and inter- and intra-communal conflicts. The signing of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS) in September 2018 and the formation of Transitional Government of National Unity in February 2020 provided a glimmer of hope to many state citizens – who have endured tremendous suffering as a result of a combination of political and climate change-related conflicts, particularly in areas where the Toposa people live.

With environmental challenges like drought or flooding driving communities from Jonglei into Eastern Equatoria, conflict over land use has intensified. Tensions between internally displaced people (IDPs) from Jonglei State and host communities in Eastern Equatoria, particularly the Madi and the Acholi, have increased due to problems such as destruction of farmlands by cattle, and the presence of small arms and light weapons in the hands of cattle camp youth. The presence of pastoralists from Jonglei in Eastern Equatoria State also increased tensions along the border with Uganda in 2022–2023, as cattle keepers moved with their herds in the border regions in search of water and pastures.

This briefing draws attention to some challenges to peace and stability in Eastern Equatoria as identified by participants in a two-day state roundtable event conducted in Torit on 26–27 June 2024. The event was organised by Saferworld and partners Itwak Women Empowerment and Women Agency for Progress Organisation. State officials, including members of the Eastern Equatoria Legislative Assembly, county and municipal counties, as well as representatives of civil society organisations and community leaders, including youth and women, attended the meeting. This briefing reflects the views of the participants and does not necessarily represent the views of Saferworld and partners.

1. Poor road infrastructure

Participants cited poor road conditions as one of the factors exacerbating conflicts in Eastern Equatoria State. They argued that, due to the very limited and often inaccessible road network across the state, security and state government officials find it difficult to respond to security incidents in rural areas. They stressed that criminals in the state have taken advantage of this situation to ambush travellers along the main roads. Many ambushes along the Torit–Juba and Torit–Kapoeta roads happen at spots where bridges are broken down or where drivers are forced to slow down due to poor road conditions. Participants also highlighted that it is difficult for local producers to get their goods to markets in Torit or Kapoeta towns as result of poor or non-existent road connections, leading to a scarcity of food items and high food prices.

2. Abduction of women and children

Women leaders, chiefs and government officials alike expressed their deep concern with the rampant abduction of women and children in the state, with Kapoeta North county being the most affected by this practice in recent months. In April 2024, authorities in Kapoeta North reported the abduction of about 90 children, which participants attributed to criminal gangs from the Murle ethnic group in Jonglei State and the Greater Pibor Administrative Area. At the roundtable event, participants expressed bitterness at the lack of intervention by both state and national governments to address this inhumane practice, which continues, they said, because of a lack of punishment for abductors. Participants believed that, unless government at state and national levels prioritise addressing the abduction of women and children, the people of Eastern Equatoria State will continue to fear for their safety.

The cycle of cattle raiding within the state, and with neighbouring communities across the border in Kenya and Uganda, continues to drive conflict in Eastern Equatoria. In April 2024, armed youth from the Murle community stole over six thousand cattle from Kapoeta North; the raid claimed the lives of many on both sides. Toposa youth from Kapoeta North managed to retrieve some of the stolen cattle, but many were never recovered, and county and state governments met with little success in their engagement with their counterparts in the Greater Pibor Administrative Area. Many fear that, unless the government takes urgent action, young people from Kapoeta North county might conduct counter-raids on Murle villages to retrieve their cattle or rescue abducted children – something that could trigger a vicious cycle of revenge attacks. Similarly, cattle rustling along the Kenya–South Sudan and Uganda–South Sudan borders is another conflict driver which the state and county leaderships in bordering counties are concerned about.

3. Gender-based violence and discriminatory cultural norms

Gender-based violence in Eastern Equatoria is common among communities and a major factor in conflict dynamics at the community and family levels. Deeply rooted patriarchal cultural norms among agro-pastoral communities like the Toposa, Buya and Didinga fuel violence against women and girls, including husbands beating their wives, giving girls as compensation for killings, and early and forced marriages.

Participants stressed that the exclusion of women and girls in decision-making processes and forums at community, county, subnational and national levels of government is a major barrier to women and girls enjoying their full rights, as provided for under the transitional constitution of South Sudan. (The constitution commits to 35 per cent participation of women in public affairs and key decision-making roles in the state and across the country – but this has not been achieved.) At the family and community levels, discriminatory cultural norms deny women and girls the right to own land and cattle, and to have a share in their parents’ estate or other family assets.

4. Small arms and light weapons in the hands of unauthorised individuals

Civilians and authorities in Eastern Equatoria State are concerned by the proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALW) in the hands of unauthorised individuals, particularly young people – who often arm themselves in order to protect their communities and livelihoods. The presence of SALW in the hands of civilians in Eastern Equatoria State has increased in recent years due to political instability and the security vacuum in rural areas. Participants at the roundtable stressed that both state and national governments need to provide security and safety guarantees to communities before any meaningful civilian disarmament is conducted in the state and across the country.

Participants also noted that the proliferation of SALW in the state is associated with increased criminality along main roads, robberies, widespread poaching in game reserves, violent communal conflicts and cattle raiding.

5. Border disputes

In early June 2024, people in Budi and Magwi counties reported encroachment by Ugandan soldiers, whom they accused of harassment, intimidation and displacement of communities from their homes.¹ Another incident of border encroachment by Ugandan wildlife authorities and the Ugandan army was reported in July 2024 in Budi’s Lotukei payam and in Ikwotos county; during this operation, Ugandan soldiers are alleged to have established a military post and installed Global Positioning System (GPS) equipment in the area.

Communities from Budi and Ikwotos counties, which contain the Kidepo Game Reserve, have also reported attacks by the Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) when they are out hunting. In June 2024, according to a civil society activist, thirteen young men from Budi county were allegedly killed by Ugandan game rangers, who accused the victims of straying into Uganda’s side of the Kidepo Valley. Such incidents are increasingly commonplace, due to the ongoing food shortage in parts of Eastern Equatoria.

Although state and county authorities stressed that border disputes with neighbouring countries are not within their remit, communities want state and county leaderships to engage with Ugandan authorities to stop the harassment and displacement of people from their farmlands. Similarly, communities and civil society organisations in the state urged the state government to press the national government to develop a solution to the ongoing border dispute with the Ugandan government.

6. Ineffective justice system

Participants at the roundtable expressed concerns over weaknesses in the delivery of justice in the state and its role in the continuation of communal violence and revenge killing in Eastern Equatoria and across South Sudan. Although the justice system is widely perceived as weak in all parts of the country, in Eastern

Equatoria – according to participants – justice delivery is almost non-existent. Lines are blurred between statutory and customary justice mechanisms, which causes confusion over which case should be handled by each court. Delays in processing cases and backlogs at the court can be a source of outrage for victims’ families – leading to people taking the law into their hands to achieve justice for the loss of loved ones or property.

Recommendations

To address the above conflict drivers in Eastern Equatoria State, participants at the roundtable event in Torit proposed the following recommendations to state and national governments, international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), and civil society.

State and national governments

- State and national governments should invest in road construction in the state by repairing key roads linking the state capital to counties, and should construct more all-season roads linking rural areas to county headquarters for easy accessibility and timely movement of goods to markets.
- Eastern Equatoria State parliament should enact state-specific laws criminalising child abduction, with concrete provision for the punishment of perpetrators.
- State and national governments should enhance the capacity of law enforcement agencies to respond to incidents of child abduction by providing funding and mobility to the police and judges.
- State government and security forces should ensure proper marking and record-keeping of guns in their possession to avoid weapons being illegally transferred to the civilian population and to ensure greater accountability.
- Eastern Equatoria State government, in coordination with the national Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Defence and other national government institutions, should conduct peaceful, comprehensive and uniform disarmament across the state and in the neighbouring Jonglei State to mitigate violent cattle raiding and child abduction.
- County and state governments, with support from the national Ministry of Interior should establish police posts in conflict hotspots and deploy police officers to curb inter-communal conflict and cattle raiding within the state and with neighbouring communities in South Sudan and across the borders with Kenya and Uganda.
- State and national governments should address cross-border issues with Ugandan authorities based on the 1956 border between Uganda and Sudan.

Civil society, INGOs, UN and Donors

- Civil society organisations (CSOs), INGOs and United Nations (UN) agencies, with support from donors, should facilitate women-to-women dialogues among women in Eastern Equatoria State, Jonglei State and the Greater Pibor Administrative Area on the scourge of women and child abduction.
- CSOs, with support from INGOs and UN agencies, should conduct inter-state dialogues among the three greater states of Eastern Equatoria, Central Equatoria and Jonglei to address overarching issues related to cattle raiding, child abduction and displacement.
- CSOs should advocate with state and county authorities for the implementation of the requirement that 35 per cent of positions in decision-making and political spaces should be occupied by women, as stipulated in the R-ARCSS.
- CSOs in Eastern Equatoria State should engage their counterparts in Uganda to conduct joint awareness raising on peaceful coexistence among border communities.
- CSOs, with support from INGOs, UN agencies and the donor community, should advocate for an end to gender inequality and promote respect for the rights of women and girls at county and state levels.
- CSOs, with support from INGOs, should conduct community awareness raising on the dangers of guns in the community, thereby preparing the population for peaceful disarmament.



About Saferworld

Saferworld is an independent, not-for-profit international organisation working to prevent violent conflict and build safer lives in countries and territories across Africa, Asia and the Middle East. We work in solidarity with people affected by conflict to improve their safety and sense of security, and conduct wider research and analysis. We use this evidence and learning to improve local, national and international policies and practices that can help build lasting peace. Our priority is people – we believe in a world where everyone can lead peaceful, fulfilling lives, free from fear and insecurity.

Saferworld has been working in South Sudan since 2008. We work with communities, civil society organisations, authorities, traditional leaders, and other international and national NGOs to prevent conflict and build peace. We prioritise working with women, young people and others who are excluded from decisions that affect them. Over the past five years, we have worked in partnership with over 20 CSOs across ten states – including nine women’s rights organisations – to establish and support more than 100 community peacebuilding

groups to identify, mitigate and resolve conflicts and security concerns. We help our CSO partners to strengthen their resources, and we provide core and flexible funding, programme accompaniment and peer-to-peer learning support. We support the development of regional and national CSO platforms, and connect people to our advocacy networks so that national and international organisations put the voices of South Sudanese civil society at the heart of what they do. Saferworld South Sudan also hosts the Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility (CSRf), which provides advice to donors, policymakers and the aid community and helps those working across the aid sector to integrate conflict sensitivity throughout their programmes, operations and policy decisions in South Sudan.

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Cover photo: Boy in Pajok orphanage draws an explosive item he has seen nearby. Children frequently report unexploded ordnance during risk education sessions.

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Notes

- 1 Johnson B (2024), ‘MP demands clarity on UPDF encroachments in South Sudan’, Eye Radio, 2 September (<https://www.eyeradio.org/mp-demands-clarity-on-updf-encroachments-in-south-sudan/>)